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# Am I Ready for the Global Apparel Industry?: Student Perspectives on Employability after a Multinational Virtual Collaboration Project

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## **Am I ready for the global apparel industry?: Student perspectives on employability after a multinational virtual collaboration project**

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### **Introduction and Background**

Being employable and prepared to enter industry are important for any student after graduation. In the context of apparel, industry preparedness refers to possessing the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure success in the local and global industry (Power, 2012). Employability extends beyond just a set of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their occupations. It also refers to having transferable or extended skills and discipline-linked or sector related skills and knowledge required by the industry as well as the ability to stay current and be employable throughout one's life (Yorke & Knight, 2003). However, Chida and Brown (2011) pointed out that a significant gap exists between industry and educational programs' assessment of fashion graduates' industry readiness. Further, it is not known how students perceive their own readiness and employability. This study investigated how multi-national apparel undergraduate students participating in a virtual collaboration project: a) define employability in the context of the apparel industry b) perceive the skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics required by the globalized apparel industry; and c) reflect on the skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics they gained or developed through the Going Global project.

### **Method**

To explore future apparel professionals' perspectives on employability, an interpretive research design was followed. Undergraduate students ( $n = 119$ ) enrolled in sourcing/global operations or fashion merchandising courses at three universities (in the United States, South Africa, and Australia) participated in the virtual collaboration project. The project extended over a one month period and included three learning tasks completed by the fourteen virtual teams. Each team consisted of 8-9 students from the three universities. Participants were predominantly female, with only 4 male students, and between the ages of 20-32 years, with an average age of 22 years. The project utilized Blackboard, a course management system. For the first learning task, each student had to introduce herself/himself to the team by posting a personal introduction presentation on the group's discussion board. After the initial introduction, students had to do a domestic job market analysis and share it with their group. They had to research "top" jobs in the design/product development, sourcing/manufacturing, and retailing/merchandising fields. From all the combined team's reports, each group had to prepare a report on the global "top" jobs from all the three countries. For the last learning task, groups had to do a supply chain analysis in terms of best practices in design/product development, sourcing/manufacturing, and retailing/merchandising. Following the last learning task students were required to reflect on the project in

a personal journal, accessible to themselves and the instructors. A total of 94 personal journals were included in the research. Students' guided reflections were compiled together and open-coding directed the data analyses and subsequent interpretation.

### Results

Students' perspective on what employability entails aligned with theoretical definitions in literature. Foremost, students believed a relevant tertiary qualification (bachelor degree) and related industry experience were essential to be employable and "marketable to apparel companies of your choice. The first theme described students' perception of *key and occupational/professional skills* and categories that emerged were functioning in an organizational environment, communication, project management, and high-order thinking skills. They viewed communication, the ability to work in a team, time-management, problem-solving, and strategically thinking as the most critical skills to have. *Knowledge in specialization areas* specific to the apparel supply-chain were categorized in terms of technical and design, product, production process, forecasting and trends, and market (consumer, local and global). Knowledge about different cultures, trade regulations, global transactions, and world politics were also mentioned frequently. *Personal competencies* were categorized into meta-cognitive, learning, experience, development. Students noted that important competencies are creativity, being open-minded; open-to-learn, flexibility, good under pressure and assertiveness. Students stated that through this project they gained some of the crucial skills such as to communicate on a "global scale" (to take different time zones and cultures into consideration), to effectively manage their time by being more pro-active with meeting deadlines, and virtual team collaborating skills. Personal competencies they developed were to be more open-minded and flexible, focused on open communication, and being more patient with the process and others when working in a virtual team with members from different cultures.

### Conclusions and Implications

Using the virtual collaboration project to expose students to the apparel job market provided students with insight into real-world expectations and a more realistic view of employment requirements in the apparel industry. This project also provided valuable information for devising relevant apparel curriculum to enhance apparel students' employability and how to effectively prepare them for the global apparel industry.

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